

sit alone, together, watch the sky

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/54288661) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/54288661>.

Rating:

[Mature](#)

Archive Warning:

[No Archive Warnings Apply](#)

Category:

[M/M](#)

Fandom:

[Masters of the Air \(TV 2024\)](#)

Relationships:

[Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan](#), [Curtis Biddick/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan](#), [John Clarence "Bucky" Egan/Original Character\(s\)](#), [Gale "Buck" Cleven & John Clarence "Bucky" Egan](#), [Curtis Biddick & Gale "Buck" Cleven & John Clarence "Bucky" Egan](#), [Gale "Buck" Cleven/Marge \(Masters of the Air\)](#)

Characters:

[John Clarence "Bucky" Egan](#), [Gale "Buck" Cleven](#), [Curtis Biddick](#), [Marge \(Masters of the Air\)](#), [Original Characters](#)

Additional Tags:

[Pre-Canon](#), [Pre-Relationship](#), [Pining](#), [inadvisable romantic decisions](#), [fic is in a series and buck x bucky will be endgame but there are Things to discuss](#), [what kind of a name is Gale anyway?](#), [Ambiguous/Open Ending](#)

Language:

[English](#)

Series:

Part 2 of [what took you so long?](#)

Stats:

Published: 2024-03-06 Words: 6,282 Chapters: 1/1

sit alone, together, watch the sky

by [iphigenias](#)

Summary

It's not hard, reminding himself that Buck doesn't feel the same way.

Notes

Gene messaged me after part 7 and said it made my first fic hit different. They were absolutely right and I sat down to write this intending to actually get to, you know, part 7. And then, well. This happened instead. I promise, there will be more to come but for now I humbly present this to you on my knees. To summarise: John being an idiot, lots of words about Austin Butler's eyes, accidental (kinda) lesbians? Please read the first fic in the series before this one. It's good i promise and this will make more sense if you do

Title is again from sir orville < 3 As always fic is based upon the fictionalised portrayals of the 100th bomb group. Absolutely no disrespect is intended toward the real men who served and this fic should not be read as RPF of any kind. That's all!

I'm [oatflatwhite](#) on tumblr. I oscillated on the rating for this a lot between M and E. Drop me a comment if you think I should up it

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

The first night he and Buck bunked together at Kelly John dreamed about it.

There was no one else in the room. The moonlight that filtered through the window was enough to illuminate the blonde of Buck's hair, turning it silver-gold and pale against the pillow. John put a hand to his cheek. Buck opened his eyes slowly, like it wasn't anything out of the ordinary; smiled and put his hand over John's.

The bed was bigger than an army-issued single when John climbed into it, the way it goes in dreams. The sheets were softer than they should've been. He bracketed Buck with his knees, elbows propping him up, tags swinging in the space between them and almost catching Buck on the chin.

Buck, who blinked up at him, John's thumb caught at the edge of his lip. His mouth parted and the pad slipped inside. Buck's other hand found the dip of John's back, pressing him forward.

John pretends, for his own sanity, that the dream ended there.

It's not hard, reminding himself that Buck doesn't feel the same way.

Marge writes so often John's sure she's funding the entire Air Force from her postal costs alone. Buck gets this look on his face, when he reads them. He tries not to in front of John anymore, not after John bared his soul and more besides, but there's only so many places a man can go in the same damn airfield. His eyes go all soft. He'll part his lips, enough that John can see the perfect line of his front teeth. He traces Marge's signature with the tip of his index finger and brings it close to his face to smell her perfume.

John doesn't get letters, not really. His mom will write but her hands aren't all that good, so the cursive is shaky, and rarely lasts more than a page. Sometimes his sisters will add a postscript, about the nice Irish boy Anne's been seeing; the classes Rebecca is taking at school. There are enough years between them that talking's never been their strong suit, but John appreciates the news nonetheless. It feels good, to have something to share with Buck, who no longer tells him the things Marge writes unless John feels ugly enough to ask. She's joined a knitting group for the boys on the front. Her sister Val near burned

her curls off with an iron. The cherry tree in her front yard's bent its branches to the first winter snow.

Twenty days before Buck's twenty-third birthday, Japan bombs Pearl Harbour. Training ramps up and it's like a pall settles over everything, right through to the new year. As if an official declaration of war has blotted out the sun. It's almost enough to make John to forget.

Almost.

They're promoted in '42. Instructing feels strange after so long being the one having orders barked at, but John finds—to his surprise—that he's good at it. Damn so. It's easy to put distance from Buck in his heart when there's so little time now to dwell on it. Marge's cherry tree blooms in the spring and she comes down to visit again, timing it just before Buck's leave so he can accompany her back to Wyoming. She's as lovely as she was the first time they met and John thinks, with a spike of whiskey-fuelled cruelty, guess Buck doesn't tell her everything.

"So, John." She laughs. "*Bucky*. Is there anyone new, since we last met?"

John pretends to hide a smile behind his beer.

"There must be. The way Gale tells it, you have the girls falling over you!"

"Yeah, well." *The way Gale tells it*. Buck's got his elbow on the table, his thumb resting against his lip. He cuts his eyes away the second John tries to meet them and the moment slides awkwardly, like a car skidding on ice. "They might be falling. Doesn't mean they stick around."

"The right one will," Marge assures him. "You can't lose hope now." She reaches out across the table, to—what, John doesn't know. To pat his arm, take his hand? Buck halts her before it happens, knotting their fingers together and bringing them to his mouth for a kiss.

"Not all of us are lucky enough to have high school sweethearts, Marge," he says softly. "Let him up, a little."

“Oh, alright.” Still she smiles at John. “So what’s Wisconsin like? I’ve always wanted to see the Great Lakes.”

Summer passes agonisingly slowly, after that. John takes his parcel of leave in Minnesota, where he catches up with the guys from St. Thomas’. Most of them haven’t enlisted yet, and they look at John different to how they used to. On his side of it, the lot of them seem so goddamn young. Dick Healy hosts a party at his place one night, and John gets drunk on expensive white wine. He catches Matthew’s eye from across the sofa. An hour later finds them in Dick’s spare room, John pressed up against the door to close it, held there by Matthew’s lovely weight as he mouths chardonnay kisses down the column of John’s throat. It feels nice. It is nice, but John has to stop himself from breaking out in hysterics when he thinks about telling Marge about it. *Well, actually, Marjorie. It’s boys, too, and they do more than just fall over me.*

Doesn’t mean he’s without the same problem. Matthew’s married, his wife right out there in Dick’s sitting room. When he presses a kiss to the sweaty bone of John’s hip and buttons him back up, John wonders, does your wife taste me on you? He blames the wine for the thought that follows: if Buck did that to me, would Marge taste it too?

“Hey.” Matthew’s on his feet. His cock is hard and noticeable in his pants and John fumbles for it, but is stopped by Matthew’s hand on his. “Where’d you go?”

Texas, John thinks nonsensically. Europe. The war. “C’mon,” he says instead, flexing his hand in Matthew’s. “Let me.”

It doesn’t take long. Matthew presses his face to John’s throat and makes quiet, choked-off noises until he spills tidily into John’s fist. He kisses John’s cheek and the shell of his ear.

“Whoever he is,” he says, stepping out from John’s embrace. “I hope he’s worth it.”

Back at base, when Buck asks him how it went, the admission crawls all the way up to the backs of John’s teeth, where it shivers, sharp and acidic. He swallows it down. “Different, to how I thought,” is what he says instead, and though an omission, it’s still the truth. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m the one that’s different.”

Buck shakes his head. “We haven’t even been to war yet, John.”

I know, John wants to say. That’s what scares me.

Buck's promoted before him. "Don't be sore," he laughs, and his eyes crinkle. "You're next."

They're transferred to Idaho. It's a hop, skip, and a jump for Marge to visit from Wyoming, but blessedly, she doesn't ask John about girls again. He lets her and Buck go off by themselves, most of the time. Boise's a new city for John to explore and there's plenty of women who'll give him the time of day here. He meets this one girl, Louise. A firecracker in bed and out with flaming red hair to boot. She has her own apartment and lets John stay overnight when he can, sharing cigarettes as they lie top-to-tail on her lumpy mattress. The first time he was over he thought her closet was the bathroom, and near choked on his own tongue when he'd asked whose trousers were the ones hanging up, and she'd answered, easy as anything, "mine."

"You ever think what you'd do without the war?" she asks one night, fucked-out and drunk, the ceiling light casting careful shadows over her freckled skin.

"Why would I?" Without the war there'd be no Buck. It's an easy answer. She looks at him like it shouldn't be. He leans over to kiss her ankle and she doesn't bring it up again.

Buck's awake when John gets back that morning. If he couldn't tell by the rigid way he's lying then the irritated sigh as John eases onto the mattress gives it away.

"What?"

"Nothing." John waits him out. Buck Cleven doesn't do *nothing*. "You could've told me."

"Told you what?"

Another sigh. "That you met someone."

"I haven't 'met someone'." It's difficult, keeping his voice so low. "I thought we didn't talk about this."

"We do when it's the same girl three Fridays in a row. I can smell her perfume, John."

It's what John had liked about her to begin with. "Still doesn't mean I've met someone. We're just having fun. There's a war on, if you

hadn't noticed."

"I've noticed." Buck's voice sounds clipped. "Have you?"

"What the hell's that s'posed to mean?"

But Buck rolls over, as clear an end to a conversation as John's ever seen. Raising his voice now would only wake the other guys, if they haven't already. John's just thankful he and Buck have gotten used to talking in circles. You'd need shears to cut through the knotted middle, and not even John knows what you'd find there.

He wakes in the morning expecting—well, John's not sure what. The cold shoulder? The same kind of uneasy conversation they'd had in Kelly, May through to September?

But Buck acts like it never happened. Claps John on the arm when he leaves the mess before him, ribs him about a landing that near rattles John's teeth loose from his skull. John wonders if he dreamt it. Wouldn't be the first time he dreamed about Buck. Wouldn't even be the first time he dreamed of them arguing, though usually those dreams turn into something else.

Then the next time Marge is around, Buck brings it up. Or, rather, brings up the idea of the four of them, out on the town: him and Marge, John and Louise, though he doesn't call her by name. "You and your girl," he says, something sparking behind his eyes. "Marge's anxious to meet her."

What fucking possessed you to write Marge about her? John wants to ask. He wants to grab Buck's shoulders and shake them. He wants to plant one on him with the certainty that Buck'll kiss him back. Right now he's hovering at eighty-twenty—the latter simply because he hopes Buck would be too kind to push him away.

But he dutifully relays the invite to Louise over the phone, who laughs so loud down the line it hurts John's eardrum, then makes a phlegmy sound in the back of her throat when she realises John is serious. "Jesus," she says. "What am I supposed to wear?"

So they meet. Louise wears her pants. John might love her, just a little, for that. She and Marge get on well enough, helped mostly along by the geographical proximity of Idaho and Wyoming. It gives them a lot to talk about. Buck mostly chews on his toothpick, and John puts away a lot of beer. They have dinner and while they're deciding on dessert, Marge says, "Gale has just the most unbearable sweet tooth,

don't you?"

Buck laughs and ducks his head. John splays his palm flat on the table and says, trying his hardest to make his voice come out completely even, "I didn't know that." Buck just looks at him and shrugs. John thinks, what else don't I know about you? How many pieces of you does Marge have that I'll never even know are there?

They don't get dessert after all, Louise shooting him a funny look when John proclaims he couldn't eat another bite. She's seen him pack away apple pie. So has Buck, for that matter, but when John looks at him he's looking at Marge.

Louise wants to go out dancing and Marge has an early train home, so they part ways. John feels bold enough to put his arm round Louise's shoulders as they walk and she sends him that same strange look, but reaches up with her left hand to hold his dangling one and bring it down close to her heart.

They find a bar to let them in and kiss sweetly, then not so sweetly, in the corner of the crowded room. John's enjoying the merits of women's trousers when Louise puts a hand in the centre of his chest and pushes him away. "Home?" she asks, her eyes dark, and John near trips over himself to comply.

But something happens on the walk over there, because Louise lets them in and flicks on the light, dumping her keys on the table by the door. She crosses her arms over her chest as she turns to John, the universal sign for *I don't want to be touched*. He backs up, leans up against the door. "I asked you about the war," she says suddenly, and her voice sounds too loud for the quiet of the room, "because I think if it wasn't on I'd have kissed my best friend instead of waving her off at the station." Her eyes don't leave John's. "She's a nurse. Somewhere in... where's Manila?"

"The Pacific," John replies faintly. "Somewhere. I don't—why are you telling me this?"

John, he expects her to say, in the tone of voice his mom always used to use when he'd said something stupid. Anne would mouth it at him across the dinner table the rest of the night. *John*. When he wasn't in trouble, at home he was always Johnnie.

That's something he's never told Buck.

Instead of answering, Louise uncrosses her arms and reaches out her

fingers to tuck a piece of hair behind John's ear. Her eyes are flat green circles under the light. "Come to bed," she says, quietly. When she tugs on his elbow he follows. He thinks they're both imagining someone else that night, and the idea should feel strange but it isn't. What sorry sons of bitches that makes the pair of them—well. There's no one else around to know.

Buck's not in the bunks the next morning. He must have stayed at the hotel with Marge. John's pretty sure they're waiting 'til marriage but he's not *that* sure. When he finds Buck in the mess, he tries to see the signs, but other than the same shadows beneath his eyes they all have, there's not a hair out of place.

"How was dancing?" Buck asks, over chewy eggs and burned bacon.

"You should've come."

"Marge was tired."

"I get it." John shrugs. "It was... nice."

"Nice." Buck sounds incredulous. "A girl like that, and you say it's *nice*?"

"A girl like what, Buck?" John keeps his tone idle, but the metal of his fork digs into his hand. A girl like me, he thinks, so loudly he's almost surprised no one can hear it. Like me, like me, like me. In this goddamn fucking war.

Buck shakes his head. "Nothing," he says.

John's too tired to push it.

Lt. Curt Biddick of Davis, California, comes to Gowan Field in the fall. He's not even in the 100th but John and Buck find excuses to shoot the shit with him anyway. The guy's a head shorter than them both and has a voice that carries right across the airfield if he wants it to. He's also John's age, which—doesn't really matter, in the war, except for when it does. "Jesus," he says to Buck. "Twenty-three and commanding a squadron?"

John groans. "You're makin' me feel old."

"You are old."

“You’re older than me!”

“That jacket makes it hard to tell.”

“*Thank you.*” Buck says the words around his toothpick. “I’ve been telling him.”

John wraps his arms protectively around the sheepskin. Being totally honest it’s not cold enough yet to wear it but he’ll take any excuse.

“Don’t disrespect the jacket.”

“Buddy.” Curt claps him on the shoulder. “Hate to break it to you, but that thing is ugly as shit.”

He’s pleased, they all get along so well. (Sheepskin slander aside.) It’s been hard to spend time with Buck alone lately. They left their early mornings together behind in Texas, but having Buck at his two o’clock’s still the norm. John just doesn’t know what to say anymore—nothing that isn’t shop talk, or the World Series, which mostly involves Buck rolling his eyes and telling him how much he doesn’t care about baseball. They don’t talk about Marge. Since that morning after the double date Buck hasn’t mentioned Louise at all. Every time John’s alone with Buck, all he can think about is how Louise saw right through him. Sure, maybe she’d been looking closer than most. But John used to be better at fooling people—if not himself, then at least the people around him. What happened, to make him so transparent? If she could see it, can Buck, too?

Curt being there feels like a buffer. There’s a lot of things they can’t talk about with him around. He does end up being the one to bring up Louise, though. Not on purpose—just asks John one afternoon if there’s anyone worth seeing in the city.

“Bucky’s got a girl,” Buck answers for him, staring straight ahead at the navigational lecture they’re nominally paying attention to. “She’s nice.”

John stares at him for a moment. Even if Buck grew a second head right now he couldn’t be more surprised. Curt’s on Buck’s other side, and meets John’s gaze with a raised eyebrow of his own.

“She’s not my girl,” John fires back, strangely defensive. “She’s just... a girl. Woman. I know.”

Curt’s other eyebrow shoots up to meet his first. “Smooth,” he comments. “Well, is she interested in getting to know anyone else?”

“If you’re talking about your ugly mug, not a chance.”

But John calls Louise up anyway. She sounds sceptical over the phone, kind of like she’d expected to never hear from John again. But she agrees to come out, their last weekend pass before the 100th moves to Walla Walla. She’s wearing a dress this time, and brings her friends. Curt is on his best behaviour; John spoils himself with top shelf scotch; Buck chews his toothpick, quiet in the corner without Marge, and the girl Louise had brought along to talk to him ends up hanging off John’s arm most of the night.

There’s a moment in the evening, Buck and Curt at the bar to get drinks, Louise’s friends Molly and Blanche in the ladies’, that she levels a gaze at John over the table he has a hard time not shrinking back from.

“What is this?” she asks, not unkindly. “You’re leaving. We both know this can’t go anywhere.”

“Curt’s staying. He could be good company.”

“Not exactly the company I want.” It’s as close to the truth as they dare admit in public. She sets her mouth into a smile. “Since we’re talking. Ruthie wrote.”

“Your... friend?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, John. My friend. Manila’s hot, apparently.” She studies him. “I could too, you know.”

“You could what?”

“Write you.” John blinks. “My very own Dear John letters.”

“I mean.” He shuffles his feet under the table. “No one really... no one actually calls me that. Except, I mean—Buck, sometimes. It’s Bucky, now.”

“Even at home?”

“Well. No.” He clears his throat. “Usually Johnnie, there.”

“Johnnie.” Her mouth curls around it. “Alright. Most people call me Lou. What’s the address, in Washington?”

He doesn’t think she’s serious. She so rarely was, when they spent time together, except for the night of the double date. But they’re two

weeks at their new base when the first letter arrives, addressed to *Johnnie*, signed from *Lou*. John holds the envelope so tight he almost tears the paper. “Your mom?” Buck asks, eyes just visible over the top of his letter from Marge. It’s been unseasonably hot today, and his blonde hair is cowlicked with sweat on one side.

John clears his throat. “Uh, no. Louise, actually.”

Buck lowers Marge’s letter. “From Boise.” He sounds—John doesn’t know how he sounds. Not like he usually does.

“Yeah.” John forces himself to shrug. Make it casual; make it mean nothing. “We’re sorta friends, I think. Thought it might be nice to keep in touch.”

In the letter, Lou tells him almost everything Ruthie last wrote. She says the power went out in her apartment, twice, because her downstairs neighbour won’t stop tripping the circuit, and that she’s gone out for drinks with Curt and it was fun, but that’s all it was, and she went home alone. *It was easier with you*, she writes. *Can’t put my finger on why!*

“I didn’t know,” Buck says. His voice still sounds strange.

“Don’t have to tell you everything, Buck.”

“No.” And Buck shifts Marge’s letter so it’s back covering his eyes. “Guess you don’t.”

They’re not long for Washington. Curt meets them down in Utah, where he’s been assigned to the 100th, though to a different squadron than Buck’s. “Couldn’t get enough?” John grins, and hugs him.

“Believe me, I tried to avoid it. I mean, one of you’s not so bad.” He breaks away, splits his smile between John and Buck. “Won’t say who.”

“Three guesses,” Buck replies, dryly.

It’s still early in winter but cold enough. John takes it better than the both of them, used to Manitowoc snows. “You know, I was born in Wisconsin,” Curt shares with him one morning, as they’re standing out in the early chill. He has his hands shoved into his armpits, taking advantage of the fact they’re not called to attention. John’s sheepskin

is doing a perfect job of keeping him warm.

“No shit?”

“Yeah. Mom got us the fuck out of there, thank God.”

“And Californians everywhere wept.”

It's while they're at Wendover that Curt meets Marge. She comes down for Buck's birthday, early by about two weeks, but Christmas time is a shit show to travel. John gets it. What he's not getting is how she's affording all these goddamn trains all over the country, but hey, John's never been in love. Not with anyone he had to cross state lines for.

“I'm so glad to meet you!” she says, in that sunny way of hers, soft curls bouncing on her shoulders as she turns her head. “I feel like Gale's only had the one friend here. At least just the one he writes about.” She sends a warm smile John's way, who wishes he'd ordered his whiskey a double.

“I have friends, Marge,” Buck protests, laughing a little. “John's just... more interesting than most.”

“Ouch,” Curt laughs, jostling John in the side with his elbow. “Y'know, interesting's what people say when they can't think of anything nice.”

“Your face is interesting.”

“Boys!” Marge's smile is big enough to split her face. “I'm just glad, is all. That he has you two.”

John meets Buck's gaze over the table. It's the same steady blue as always, unclouded by booze. John thinks, if you lined up Buck's eyes and a clear summer sky, you'd be hard pressed to tell the difference. Both big enough to fall through.

He and Curt head back together, while Buck does something awful like hold Marge's hand beneath the moonlight. They're both too blitzed to drive but it's not too far from the town back to base. Curt leans into John as they walk, trying not to trip over their own feet. He's warm despite the cold.

“She's nice,” Curt says, valiantly keeping the words from slurring. “Yeah. Suits him. Blonde and... nice n' perfect.”

"She is that." John keeps walking. "Hey. You ever, uh. Meet up with Louise?"

"Your girl from Boise?" Curt lets out a gusty sigh. "Yeah. She was fun. Don't know how much she liked me, though."

"She liked you." John's not sure why his voice comes out so defensive. "She writes me sometimes. Said you were a good one."

"Guess not as good as you."

"Ha." John elbows him. "Who is." The movement is a little too much for him, and ends up toppling them both into the grass. Curt's half on top of him and John shoves him off with a groan. "Do you think they'd miss us if we never got up from here?"

"Mmph mmph," Curt says into his shoulder. He turns his head and the words come out clearer. "Buck would."

The laugh John makes is ugly-sounding, even to his ears. "I doubt it. Not with her here."

"She do somethin' to piss you off?"

"What? No."

"Right." Curt manages to prop himself up with an elbow. "That's why your face looked like you sucked a lemon all night. You sweet on her?"

"What?" John says again. "No."

"Right." Curt's breath comes in sharp all of a sudden. "Oh. Right." He grabs John's chin with his free hand and tilts his face toward him, the pale planes of his cheekbones somehow sharp and indistinct all at once. "Didn't peg you for a queer, Bucky," he says quietly, and sounds more sober than he has all night.

The thing is—John could deny it. Should deny it. He hasn't known Curt all that long, for all they get on together. He's a captain and Curt's just a lieutenant so it shouldn't matter what he says, and to whom—but that kind of shit sticks in the army.

It sticks just about anywhere, but John would rather watch Buck kiss Marge a hundred times over than get kicked out of the war before it's even really begun.

But also—it's Curt. John hasn't made friends so fast with anyone, not even Buck. Maybe it really is the fact they're both from Wisconsin. Maybe it's the way Curt's looking at him. Hell, maybe it's the drink.

John leans up and kisses him.

There's no surprise whatsoever in Curt as he takes John's face in both his hands and kisses him back.

It's not like in John's dreams.

They're never out in the open like this, him and Buck. He doesn't look too closely as to what that says about him. They're in the bunks, or the gents' at the bar; once, memorably, in the cockpit of John's fort. In his dreams Buck kisses like he does everything: with intent. He licks into John's mouth, not meanly, just with the kind of laser focus he applies to more important things. His hands feel bigger on John's face every time. They're hot like blazes, and so is the rest of him, whether he's clothed or not. He's freckled on his chest, a truism John's subconscious picked out from too many memories of PT, looking too closely at the man beside him, who wasn't looking his way at all.

Buck's the one who fucks him. It's always that way. John's done both before so he's not really sure why, only knows that the feeling of Buck inside of him is almost too goddamn much to describe. It's so much that it wakes John up more often than not. Buck's slow, and he takes his time. His hands are tender on the bones of John's hips. If they're plastered back to front Buck will kiss the divots in John's spine.

That very first time they'd met Buck had looked at John in the pale, pre-dawn light. His eyes had come together, furrowing the skin of his brow in-between, and he'd parted his lips on the verge of saying something. That's the image that comes to John often. Buck, caught between possibilities: whatever he does say will make it real.

"Fuck," Curt says. "Fuck, Jesus."

"We shouldn't do this."

"Yeah, fuck." Curt rolls off him. John tips his head in the grass to look his way. It's a week out from the full moon; there's enough light to see the strong line of Curt's nose. The dark fall of his hair on the ground.

“We shouldn’t do this here,” John clarifies. Curt blinks and looks at him.

“Yeah,” he says again. “Okay.”

It’s in all the papers the last week of ’42: *NURSES FLEE BATAAN*. “Fuck,” John says, reading the article, about the nurses who made it out of Manila and the ones who didn’t. “Fuck, I—who’s got a pen?”

They’re at breakfast. John can’t wait ‘til tonight. He writes Lou on a scrap of paper scrounged from the kitchen with Buck and Curt’s eyes both on him. Once he’s done he shoves the clipping inside. “Louise has a friend,” is all he can bring himself to say. “She’s stationed in the Philippines.”

“You think they’d be safe, of all people,” Curt replies softly. Last night he’d had John’s cock in his mouth. This morning he looks at him like John’s worth caring for.

He’s a major by the time Lou writes back, two weeks into January and the fifth year of the war. Ruthie made it out. *All she cares about is the girls she’s left behind. I would be mad if I didn’t know her so well.*

Alright, so I’m still mad.

John blows Curt the next time they have the chance. His knees fuss on the hard-packed earth. “This feels—” Curt gasps, one hand curling into John’s hair, “—wrong. A major—on his knees—for me?”

John bites at the inside of his thigh. “Don’t tell them I play favourites.”

“I’d be concerned if you were doing this to—anyone—else—”

Somehow, amidst the lot of it, he starts to miss Buck.

They see each other, often enough. Every day. Sleep side-by-side, same as ever, eat in the mess across the table when their schedules allow. Only it used to be that it was him and Buck. Just him and Buck. John’s not sure when he started missing those early mornings out in Texas but it hits him, late one night, that he could reach over and touch Buck if he wanted but he’s never been so far away.

The jump rope’s still in his footlocker.

He doesn't bring it out 'til they're in Nebraska.

It is, for once, closer to home. John takes the last bit of leave he'll probably have before he ships out in February, the seasons not yet starting to turn. Their front door could do with a new coat of paint, so John goes out and gets some. His mom likes green.

Anne's boyfriend comes round most nights and John kicks his ass at cards. So does Anne. His name's Robert and he has these huge brown eyes and a heart murmur that makes him 4F. John can't bring himself to be harsh on the kid. His sister's got good taste, and besides, John learned long ago to keep out of her business.

Too bad she never learned the same.

"Who's Marge?" she asks, John's second-last day at home, when he finds her in his old room sat on his old bed, reading a letter that's two years old that John should've left in Nebraska. In Texas. Here, when it first arrived.

"No one," he answers, on instinct. He grabs the paper from her slack hands. "My buddy's fiancée. Well. Close enough."

"*Buck*," Anne says. "And you're Bucky. How does that work?"

"Funnily enough, we're pretty intelligent in the Air Force. Must be all the lectures they make us sit through."

"Ha, ha." She kicks her feet into the carpet. "Why's your buddy's fiancée writing you?"

"She's nice. It's what she does."

"God, Johnnie." Anne laughs. "What did she do to you?"

"Nothing!" John scrunches the letter up, then thinks better of it. He flattens it out, tears it in half, then half again. "Why does everyone always say that?"

"Well, then it's probably true."

"Gee, thanks." Anne just looks at him.

"Johnnie," she says, after a moment. "You'll come home?"

And, well. It's Buck who won't make promises he can't keep. John's never been so pure.

“Promise,” he smiles at her. He goes easy on Robert that night.

It's his first full day back in Kearney that John thinks about the jump rope. He wakes early the next morning, his body sending him some kind of unconscious signal. It's not even five. Buck's sound asleep beside him.

The rope is familiar in John's hands. He resists the urge to shake out the disuse, because though it's been sitting for months on end it still looks as good as new, apart from the grip—faded, around the shadow of Buck's handprints. John puts his own in their place.

Buck's hands are just slightly bigger.

He'd forgotten, how much effort skipping takes. His lungs start to burn two minutes in. He almost does trip and break his ankle, because it was always Buck who practiced at this—John only ever really watched. In hindsight, it's fucking incredible how long it took Buck to catch on.

Longer than it takes him to meet John out here, on the grass.

The door is as soundless as the one back in Texas. John only hears Buck's foot on the stair. He turns and meets Buck's enquiring glance, soft with sleep. “For old times' sake?” he asks, holding out the rope.

An olive branch.

If Buck's rusty he doesn't show it. His breath comes swift and regular. His cheeks turn a little red, but he's paler in the winter, so it's allowed. John sits on the grass because it's all he can do and after five minutes with the rope Buck joins him.

“Thought you hated it.”

“Who told you that?”

“You did.” Buck makes a so-so gesture in the air with his hand.
“Tangentially.”

“Well, maybe I changed my mind.”

“Can you change out of that sheepskin, too?”

“Buck Cleven!” John grasps at the fabric at his chest. “I'm hurt.”

Buck's knee nudges into his and stays there. “You'll live,” he smiles,

like it isn't breaking John's goddamn heart. "Why did we stop doing this?" he goes on, trailing off slightly, eyes glazing over to remember. John can tell the exact moment he does, because his smile becomes fixed in place. A butterfly pinned to its board.

"We got old," John offers instead. Buck snorts, shoulders dropping in relief, and takes the out.

"Speak for yourself." He taps their knees again. "I don't know if I've said this before. I'm damn glad you found me that morning. Saved my ass from a lonely few years."

"You looked like you needed it." And I think you saved my life, John doesn't say. "This time next year."

"Hm?"

"This time next year. Where d'you think we'll be?"

John would laugh off the question if it had been Buck the one asking; but Buck, because he's Buck, weighs it carefully, mouth pulling into a frown. "Home, hopefully. But they say that every year, don't they?"

"Berlin by Christmas," John echoes.

"Then—I don't know. Somewhere in England. Not too cold."

"Think everywhere in England's cold, Buck."

He gets a grin for his trouble. "Shuddup. You'd be there, obviously. And Curt and the rest."

"Them's some pretty long odds," John tells him quietly. "Didn't take you for a betting man."

"I'm not." Buck exhales a long breath. "I just trust the guy in the fort next to me. He's a pretty good pilot, if you hadn't heard."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. They made him Operations Officer, but I don't know. Don't know if I see it lasting. Reckon he'll be itching to get back in the seat."

"Yeah?" John asks again. Something unbearable is happening to his heart. He could keel over and die right here if he wasn't so desperate to hear what Buck has to say.

“Yeah.” Buck looks right at him. It’s not light enough to see his expression properly, but John can take a guess. He knows the guy pretty well by now. “Loyal to a fault. Even though no one’d blame him if he weren’t.”

His hand, deliberate, like all things Buck does in his life, finds John’s in the grass.

He squeezes it,

and lets go.

They’re crowded together around the table. Buck and Marge, John and Marge’s friend. He should feel worse for not knowing her name, but he’s going to war tomorrow. There are worse things to feel worse about.

“First day of basic training,” Buck is saying, “this fella walks up to me and says I remind him of a guy back home, goes by the name Buck. I tell him my name’s Gale, Gale Clevin. But Bucky here, he’s not deterred. No, sir. It’s just, Buck this, Buck that. ‘Buck, can you help me tie my shoes.’ ‘Buck, help me fly this plane.’ Before I know it, the whole damn Eighth Air Force is calling me Buck.”

It’s just close enough to the truth John could almost believe it. He tips his head toward the girl next to him. “What kind of a name is Gale, anyway?”

They spend the rest of the night drinking and dancing. Or, well. John spends it drinking and dancing. Buck spends it watching him make decisions he’ll likely regret in the morning. Curt’s home on one last bit of leave before shipping out; it’s just the two of them now. This morning, while Marge had still been making her way over, he and Buck had laid together on the pre-dawn grass. Not even the cicadas were out. It was the last morning, they knew, before everything around them changed, and they’d spent it in near silence. Looking up at the pale sky.

End Notes

Historical notes:

- a timeline as best I could muddle through for the Buckies and Curt is: Buck and Bucky promoted Apr 42 (anzac day!) > Gowan Field in Idaho July > Curt arrives October as part of the 29th bombardment group > Buckies to Walla Walla, Washington in November > Wendover Idaho in December where Curt catches up to them > Jan 43 promoted to major > Kearney, Nebraska in February 43 > John goes to England in May. There's a lot of fudging in there and smoothing things over to fit in the bits I wanted, so don't look too close, okay?

- the Battle of Bataan/the Philippines is a real thing, as are the nurses/Angels of Bataan. They're fascinating and deserve a look up if you haven't heard of them! Is it feasible Louise's friend was one of them? Well, probably not

- Saint Thomas' is Saint Thomas College in Minnesota

- Bucky's mom did call him Johnnie, or at least addressed his letters as such. I saw this on tumblr (reliable source ik) and ran with it. I think his dad might have still been alive at this point and died some time in 1943, but I didn't look it up, and his absence fit better. Sorry!

It's 10pm and I'm hitting post on this without thinking much more about it. Any glaring issues I will smooth over in the mornin <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!